

# St. Petersburg Times

## And access for all

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### Abstract:

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*Concrete Change, working with the Georgia Home Builders Association, has created a voluntary certification program called Easy Living. The first two certificates were awarded in May for accessible new homes, one occupied by a man who uses a walker, one by a woman with no disability. (But Smith hopes this voluntary program will not become a way "to buy off legislation" mandating visitability. "We don't want a program that no one does anything about that never really results in lots of houses" with visitability features.)*

*Eleanor Smith lives in a 67-unit community where all the homes are visitable, though few of the residents, who are of a variety of ages, have permanent mobility problems. One neighbor recently had a baby via Caesarean section and was delighted to be able to take her infant out in his stroller without having to lift the baby, since all the entrances have no steps. Another neighbor who injured her knee while working out had to be carried out of the gym to the doctor's office and came home in a wheelchair. "She was glad she could be pushed up the sidewalk to her door, and even more glad the doorways were wide enough so she could use her own commode," Smith said.*

### Full Text:

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The word of the week - make that the word of the year - is visitability.

Not visibility. VISIT-ability.

It's the idea that anyone should be able to visit any house, easily enter the place, move around inside, use the bathroom and generally feel welcome.

That could be a young mom or dad struggling with a baby in a stroller. Or a teenager who broke her foot playing soccer, swinging along on crutches for a few weeks. Or Joe, your co-worker, the one in a wheelchair, when he comes over to delete the virus from your home computer. Or you, recovering from surgery after your accident on the ski slopes or your inline skates.

"It's not for the elderly or for retirement homes. It's for all ages," William Novelli, executive director of AARP, told 475 developers, builders, architects and designers recently at the national Seniors Housing Symposium in Orlando.

So what makes a house visitable? Here are some basics:

At least one entrance with no steps.

32 inches clear passage through all interior doors, including bathrooms. That means doors 36 inches wide.

At least a half-bath, preferably a full bath, on the main floor.

Florida already has a law requiring that homes have at least one bathroom with a door with a 29-inch clear opening.

Eleanor Smith, the founder of a Georgia advocacy group called Concrete Change, recalled growing up using a wheelchair after suffering polio in 1947, when she was 3 years old. She couldn't get into the town library, so a friend would bring out stacks of books "piled up to her chin" and Eleanor would make her choices at the foot of the 10 steps leading inside.

Once, while she was playing outside with her best friend, "a storm blew up, and her mom tried to pull me into the house," which was not wheelchair-accessible, "and my chair fell over backwards on her," Smith recalled in a telephone interview from her home in Decatur, Ga. "It was kind of scary, but the main thing I was feeling was, 'I'm a lot of trouble.' "

Now, laws make accessibility mandatory in public buildings, and mobility-impaired people of all ages are common sights, out and about in their wheelchair vans, buzzing around the mall or the supermarket in scooters or in wheelchairs or walkers.

"But the one place that has not caught up yet is homes," Smith said. "We're still building them like they were 100 years ago when the average life span was 50. No, we can't feel guilty or bad about the existing houses that don't have access because it was not on the radar screen" when they were built. "But you can feel you have a responsibility to change what's being built now."

Visitability starts to take on a new prominence as baby boomers begin to move into their retirement years and to face the inevitable limitations of aging. Just as they have called the tune in virtually every area all their lives, this group will have a huge influence on how we build in the next few decades. There are 76-million baby boomers; they earn \$2-trillion annually and control 70 percent of the nation's financial assets.

"Most homes in America are not designed to be age-friendly," Novelli said. "We're getting better at it, but we're not accommodating people as they age."

Who can't come to the party?

Louis Tenenbaum is a former builder and remodeling contractor in Potomac, Md., who now calls himself an "independent living strategist" and works to make homes more visitable. He said he gets a lot of calls around the holidays when people are giving parties and suddenly realize that someone on the guest list won't be able to get in the house because she or he uses a wheelchair or other mobility device.

"Do you not invite them, and hope they won't hear about the party?" he asked his audience at the housing symposium. "We rent a lot of aluminum ramps at Christmastime."

But it's not just a once-every-four-years issue when it's your turn to host the party, Tenenbaum said in a phone interview later. "It's a civil rights issue. It's a community issue."

He recalled meeting a man who used a wheelchair who said he had pretty much come to terms with his disability until his little daughter started attending birthday parties. Like the other parents, Dad would come to pick her up just before the party ended, when everyone gathered around to sing Happy Birthday and enjoy the cake. But the homes weren't visitable - this dad could not get in - so he waited in his car at the curb while the others socialized.

He knew another man in a wheelchair who enjoyed watching his son play soccer, and who sat at the sidelines with the other parents to cheer the children. After the game, when the parents decided to adjourn to someone's house to watch a golf match on a big-screen TV, this dad went home alone because the friend's house was not accessible.

"Those of us who are just good neighbors, good people, don't recognize how much the inaccessibility of our homes separates and divides us," Tenenbaum said.

"Could you invite Christopher Reeve into your home? Or Richard Pryor?" Tenenbaum asked, naming two stars who use wheelchairs. Reeve suffered spinal-cord injuries in a fall from a horse; Pryor has multiple sclerosis. "Would you be embarrassed to invite them over for a cup of tea, knowing they would have to leave to use the bathroom?"

'Demographics are destiny'

Some builders are still reluctant to include visitability components in their homes. They say buyers bypass anything that might suggest they're getting old or aren't as able as they once were. And Eleanor Smith believes "there really is such a thing as ableism, exactly like racism and sexism."

Given Florida's flat terrain and concrete-slab construction, "there's no reason not to have every new house in Florida with a no- step entrance," Smith said, "if local activists will get cracking."

Some Florida retirement communities already incorporate some visitability features. At U.S. Home's active-adult communities at Heritage Springs in New Port Richey and Heritage Pines in Hudson, those include wider doorways and halls and at least one accessible bathroom. U.S. Home does not routinely build a zero-step entrance, though it will offer that as an option, said Bob Fertig, who heads the company's North Florida division.

At Sun City Center in Hillsborough County, visitability features are not standard, spokeswoman Jillian Koepke said, but can be provided on request.

Elsewhere in the housing industry there are these responses to the changing housing market:

The Seniors Housing Council, part of the National Association of Home Builders, is urging its members to voluntarily include visitability standards in new homes.

Naperville, Ill., and Pima County, Ariz., have passed ordinances requiring that all new homes include some visitability features.

Seven Florida remodeling contractors recently were among the first 50 nationwide to qualify as Certified Aging in Place Specialists, a program developed by AARP and the National Association of Home Builders. Contractors learn how to renovate homes to accommodate the owners' abilities and needs.

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Atlanta has an ordinance mandating that all new homes built with public money be visitable.

To the charge that visitability will drive up the price of homes, Concrete Change estimates it costs \$200 per home to create a zero- step entrance and wider interior doors ("less than a third the cost of one bay window," its Web site says). Adding blocking in a bathroom wall where grab bars can be attached "is an insignificant time commitment done with scraps of lumber," Tenenbaum says. "It represents a level of thoughtfulness but not significant cost."

Adding a zero-step entrance to an existing home might cost \$1,000, and widening an existing doorway could cost \$700,

according to the National Association of Home Builders.

"The other thing that will compel builders to pay attention is the fact that these issues really enlarge the market," Tenenbaum said. "Demographics are destiny. By making the house more valuable to more people, you're enlarging your market. Builders are people who like to be motivated. If you're offering them a challenge that may be a marketing advantage, that's wonderful."

Eleanor Smith lives in a 67-unit community where all the homes are visitable, though few of the residents, who are of a variety of ages, have permanent mobility problems. One neighbor recently had a baby via Caesarean section and was delighted to be able to take her infant out in his stroller without having to lift the baby, since all the entrances have no steps. Another neighbor who injured her knee while working out had to be carried out of the gym to the doctor's office and came home in a wheelchair. "She was glad she could be pushed up the sidewalk to her door, and even more glad the doorways were wide enough so she could use her own commode," Smith said.

A third neighbor began a romantic relationship with a man in a wheelchair. Said Smith: "He told her he's been disabled 17 years and this is the first time he'd ever been able to go to a nondisabled person's house and not be picked up."

SURFBOARD:

INFORMATION ONLINE

Concrete Change has a Web site at <http://concretechange.home.mindspring.com>.

[concretechange.home.mindspring.com](http://concretechange.home.mindspring.com), where it offers information about visitability, enabling ordinances from various cities, Fair Housing laws, "myths and facts" and construction costs.

Interior designer Mary Jo Peterson, a leader in designing accommodating spaces, has a Web site at [www.mjpdesign.com](http://www.mjpdesign.com). Click on "Universal Design."

At [www.iCan.com](http://www.iCan.com), "the leading disability community," read stories about the visitability movement and find other resources for people with disabilities.

AARP's Web site is at [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org). A report on visitability is at <http://research.aarp.org>.

Sun City Center in Hillsborough County, developed by WCI Communities, maintains a Web site at [www.wcicomunities.com](http://www.wcicomunities.com).

U.S. Home's Web site is at [www.lennar.com/ushome](http://www.lennar.com/ushome).

Look who you're missing

Could someone using a wheelchair, scooter or walker stop by your house for a visit? If steps and narrow doorways prevent that, you might miss out on a visit from these notables:

RICHARD PRYOR, actor-comedian

JOHN HOCKENBERRY, onetime NPR reporter, current Dateline NBC correspondent and MSNBC host

MAX CLELAND, U.S. senator from Georgia, head of Veterans Administration under President Carter

LARRY FLYNT, Hustler magazine publisher

ANNETTE FUNICELLO, ex-Mouseketeer, who has multiple sclerosis.

CHRISTOPHER REEVE, actor, injured in fall from horse.

STEPHEN HAWKING, physicist, who has ALS.

### [Illustration]

Caption: Annette Funicello with Mickey and Minnie Mouse.; Christopher Reeve; tephen Hawking; A couple pulls a man in wheelchair who is wearing a party hat up stairs with rope.; Photo: PHOTO, Associated Press, (3); DRAWING, MIKE SUDAL

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